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Fiasco of 1961 regretted by new, young president

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On April 17, 1961, a ragtag force of 1,400 Cuban exiles — financed and trained by the CIA — landed on the southern coast of Cuba intending to liberate their homeland from communism, only to be routed in the mosquito-infested swamps by Cuban forces under the personal command of Fidel Castro.

"How could I have been so stupid to allow them to go ahead?" President John F. Kennedy said afterward of the event that jolted his 3-month-old administration and, many believe, helped spawn the Cuban missile and Berlin crises.

There is agreement inside and outside of government that the humiliating episode gained absolutely nothing for the United States and in fact made things worse. Castro was bolstered abroad for defeating America 90 miles from its shore, consolidated his power at home with a death knell to whatever resistance was left and was driven further into the Soviet orbit.

"I think the Bay of Pigs is one of the few oddities of history that's very rare — a perfect failure," said historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who as a White House aide to Mr. Kennedy argued against the invasion. Like others, he closed ranks with his colleagues once the "go" decision was made.

Debate still is heard on whether the CIA's invasion plan was a losing proposition from the start, or whether American air strikes canceled by Mr. Kennedy would have boosted the chance of success.

Both sides in the current debate over American support for the Contra rebels battling in Nicaragua cite the Bay of Pigs. Critics of the Reagan administration's plans

to give military aid to the rebels charge that Nicaragua is a Bay of Pigs replay; supporters say the United States should not make the same mistake in Nicaragua and should give the Contras all the support they need.

The CIA has never fully recovered from the fiasco, its worst failure ever.

The episode is seared in the memory of Cubans who remained on the Communist-run island and those who left.

"I don't blame President Kennedy," said Erneido Oliva, second-in-command of the Cuban exile brigade and who led a small contingent that fought valiantly in the Cuban swamps for 10 days. "It was a political decision."

"I never thought about defeat. I am a professional soldier," said Mr. Oliva, who is thought to be the last of the invaders to surrender. "I accomplished my mission. I am proud of what I did. I'm proud of what the men who fought with me did."

Mr. Oliva was one of 1,189 Brigadistas taken prisoner by Mr. Castro. Another 114 of the invaders died and about 150 never made the landing. Che Guevara visited Mr. Oliva in prison and told him he would be executed; he still does not understand why he was not.

Mr. Castro ransomed the prisoners to the United States after 20 months for \$53 million. They were met by Mr. Kennedy at the Orange Bowl in Miami, where Mr. Oliva presented Mr. Kennedy with the Brigade's flag that had flown for three days at Giron, at the mouth of Bahia de Cochinos — the Bay of Pigs. "I can assure you that this flag will be returned to his brigade at a free Havana," Mr. Kennedy promised the Cubans.

But 25 years later, Mr. Oliva, 53, a brigadier general in the District of Columbia National Guard and a D.C. government official, has given up on the idea of organizing an invading force, instead hoping that "someday Cuba could be freed from the inside."

E. Howard Hunt, the CIA's pre-invasion liaison with Cuban exile politicians who later plotted the Watergate break-in, said the brigade had been evaluated by the Pentagon as "the finest, most capable fighting force in the hemisphere."

"I know it's an unfashionable word," Mr. Hunt said, "but they were betrayed by America."

But Mr. Oliva, who once said he would have swum to Cuba with 50 men to strike at Mr. Castro, with or without American help, insisted, "I never ever, not even when I was in prison, felt betrayed by the United States."

Since the Bay of Pigs, U.S. administrations have alternately sought to assassinate Mr. Castro, isolate him, negotiate with him, improve relations, threaten or just plain ignore him. But the basic equation has been static. With massive Soviet assistance, the bearded, charismatic leader has stayed a thorn in Washington's side with his support of leftist national liberation movements worldwide, including Nicaragua.

"He has made his whole career of standing up to the United States, like [Libyan leader Muammar] Qaddafi, from 90 miles away," said a State Department official who requested anonymity.

The administration is willing to reach agreements with Mr. Castro on such minor practical items as immigration. But officials, conceding his popularity, look to his eventual passing from the scene for a break in the stalemate. At 59, however, Mr. Castro is well-entrenched and appears vibrant, despite periodic rumors of ill health.

Cuba and the United States have had diplomatic offices, but not formal embassies, in each other's capital since 1979, under an agreement reached during the Carter administration. And the United States maintains a trade embargo. President Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations as his administration put the forces in motion for the invasion that Mr. Kennedy failed to halt.

Wayne Smith, who headed the U.S. interests section in Havana in 1979-82 during the Carter administration, said that in his dealings with the Cubans, the Bay of Pigs "is always there."

"They will say, 'You did it once, why not again?'" he said. "It's ingrained in the Cuban psyche."

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The Bay of Pigs also seems ingrained on the American psyche. It most recently reared its head in the debate over the Reagan administration's proposal to provide \$100 million in aid — \$70 million of it military — to the some 15,000 Contra rebels seeking to topple Nicaragua's Sandinista regime.

Mr. Kennedy, during the 1960 election campaign, called the anti-Castro forces "fighters for freedom." His opponent, Vice President Richard Nixon, called the Castro regime a "cancer" that must be removed. The Reagan administration has used the same rhetoric to make its case for Contra aid.

Administration critics say that in both cases, popular opposition to the government in power was oversold in Washington. In the same way that the CIA predicted a popular uprising against Mr. Castro would follow an invasion, they say, the Reagan administration is exaggerating popular support for the Contras.

"This re-enactment of the Bay of Pigs in Central America today shows just how short memory is," said Mr. Schlesinger.

Administration supporters also see similarities, contending the United States showed a lack of will in Cuba by failing to intervene militarily to help the invaders secure a beachhead where they could set up a provisional government. They warn this nation should not make the same mistake in Nicaragua.

"The Reagan people are determined not to make the same mistake that the Kennedy people did, that is to say they didn't follow through," said Mark Falcoff, a Latin American specialist at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "This is not just an exotic group of people dropped onto the beaches but rather a movement that has a certain continuity within Nicaraguan society, and indeed is a threat to the regime in a way I don't think the Bay of Pigs ever was."

But former U.S. diplomat Smith, who now teaches and writes on policy issues, believes Cuba is "very

analagous" to the current situation in Nicaragua. "The Contras can't win unless we go in with our own troops," he said.

George Fauriol, director of Latin American studies at Georgetown University's Central for Strategic and International Studies, said the Bay of Pigs continues to have a profound impact on U.S. relations with Latin America, feeding the impression "that when the chips are down, the United States simply can't really pull it off."

The lingering impression that the United States "either doesn't have the will or the technical expertise or doesn't use them correctly," he said, makes Latin nations reluctant to join forces with Washington on such things as Nicaragua.

"We're still suffering from the consequences of a lack of will," said Frank Calzon, executive director of the Cuban-American National Foundation.

Sen. Claiborne Pell, Rhode Island Democrat, visited Cuba as a senator-elect shortly before the invasion and came away with the impression that Mr. Castro was rather popular and that an invasion would be unwise. "I reported this back to [CIA director] Allen Dulles and the high command of the CIA," Mr. Pell recalled. "They all nodded their heads very sagely and didn't do anything about it."

After the invasion, Mr. Pell said, he was chastised by Mr. Kennedy for not bringing his views directly to the White House. "It taught me a real lesson. On something of real importance, you didn't settle for anyone below the top," he said.

Mr. Kennedy, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, fired Mr. Dulles and his deputy, Richard Bissell. They had overseen the invasion and, Kennedy partisans contend, railroaded the new president. Mr. Kennedy, who told aide Theodore Sorenson he had "grave doubts" about the invasion from the start, also brought his brother, Robert, into foreign policy deliberations.

The State Department official who requested anonymity said the lesson learned is that "if a state is going to engage in that, it should do so successfully or not at all."

Peter Wyden wrote in "Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story," the most definitive history, that the invasion was a "wild gamble" that failed for "altogether human reasons."